

Testimony of Bruce Hyde of New London on Raised Bill 314 before the Environment Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of raised Bill 314. From 1990 to 2008 I was the Director of Development and Planning for the City of New London. During that time I, along with many others from the city of New London and the city and town of Groton and the then CT Department of Environmental Protection worked long hours to establish the Thames Estuary Maritime Heritage Park as set out in the legislation creating by PA 87-463. This effort was viewed as economic development project as well as the creation of a cultural attraction. While some progress was made, ultimately the Maritime Heritage Park exists in name only. The original concept was to link together existing historic sites, state parks, museums and other attractions with a maritime theme to create a visitor experience that was greater than the sum of its parts. In addition, a 10,000+ sq.ft. interactive visitor's center was envisioned to act as an anchor, getting people excited about traveling to the satellite sites to learn more. The possibility of establishing a water taxi or tour boat to ferry tourists and residents to two state parks (Ft. Griswold and Ft. Trumbull), three lighthouses (New London Ledge, New London Harbor and Avery Point) as well as the Coast Guard and Submarine Force Museums was also in the planning stage. Being a state park, the costs associated with construction and operation of the visitor's center would come from the CTDEEP budget. While some capital funding was made available, understandable concern over ongoing operational costs resulted in the center never being built. This combined with the somewhat cumbersome administrative structure and lack of any real marketing or promotional plan lead to a gradual decline in interest in the Maritime Heritage Park. Some outdoor elements, requiring no staff and little maintenance, were put into place but the true potential of the park to be a destination for tourists, a place of interest for local residents and a compliment to existing major tourist attractions in the region has yet to be realized.

The Maritime Heritage park concept is still sound and should be resurrected. The announcement of the Coast Guard Museum in New London has sparked a renewed interest in the Maritime Heritage Park and the story we can tell. And, what better way to promote the *Connecticut-Still Revolutionary* tourism campaign than by creating an attraction that boasts two of the most recognizable names from the Revolutionary War, Nathan Hale and Benedict Arnold, as part of its history. An unparalleled variety of ships, from submarines to America's tall ship The Eagle, ferries to research vessels, fishing boats to tugs can be seen from the banks of the Thames River. There are few other places in the world where one can see working waterfront with such an array of vessels.

So what is different now? Beside the Coast Guard Museum acting as an anchor, technological changes have allowed us to rethink how to deliver the message. Back in the early 1990s no one had heard of a smart phone or an app. By using new technology, there is an opportunity to expand the impact of the Coast Guard Museum. I believe that this bill will help to streamline the process and make the Thames Maritime Heritage Park a reality, promoting tourism and economic development in the region and the state as a whole.

While my comments have been focused on the Thames Maritime Heritage Park, the other Heritage Parks created under PA 87-463 in Willimantic, Waterbury, Norwalk, and other communities stand to benefit as well. I urge your support for this bill. Thank you.